

Peter Buettner

Root Beings

The roots started out cold and dead, some a little scary even—those from my parents’ house for example, wet with winter muck and seeming half rotten to me as they lay on the lawn where Art and Kikki left them. Others, beach wood pulled from the sand, pine knots twisted among the needles in the Alps, were dry and skeletal. Their forms were varied and beautiful—some intricate and delicate, some muscular and smooth, some jagged and frankly menacing—but all were really nothing more to me than interesting objects, sculptural shapes.

Upstairs in Kikki’s studio at the top of our home, in the presence of the drawings and paintings that have sprung up and multiplied there among them, the roots are transformed. True, they are now dry and warm and somehow mellowed in the sunny space, but the transformation feels more profound. Fundamentally, they now feel *alive* in a way they did not before; and they have gained this life through Kikki’s work.

Some of the drawings tacked up among them in her studio—her starting points, preliminary studies—begin and end with the roots as inanimate shapes: more or less faithful sketches, graphite lines doing the job of producing swathes and curves that the brain interprets as woody forms. But other drawings, more developed, become a taking-off from the forms, as if the lines evolved a root-like life of their own once transmitted to paper, and unfurled themselves in search of moisture and sustenance. This “root-like life” is the beginning of what is wondrous to me in Kikki’s drawings and paintings. These line images do not represent a picture of some other, real thing outside of the paper, instead they have begun to represent themselves as independent entities, as living lines—yet they are not abstractions, which, divorced from overt reference to outside forms, truly represent only themselves. These lines are somewhere in between, and for that, to me, interesting.

The paintings take a further step. Here not only the lines and forms but also the colors have departed from their source objects. Many of them also float or hover within the canvas, no longer earth-bound (quite literally, no longer “rooted”) and in some cases seemingly not bound in physical space at all but appearing with sense of pure and singular manifestation I can associate only with dreaming. The forms depicted, like the drawings, give a sense of being alive within the canvas. But in this case they seem to me alive not merely in a vegetative sense but *animated*—as if the roots have acquired some sort of “animal” nature when transmuted to the canvas. To me they are creatures, neither vegetable nor animal nor human, yet with a kind of personhood. While I gaze at them, perhaps they gaze back at me.

It is a peculiar sensation, and a unique gift of Kikki’s. Years ago, she would paint mundane objects—pliers, scissors, whatever—that seemed to me uncannily alive. Somehow there was a little personality in there, and I couldn’t understand how that sensation was transmitted—there were no eyes or mouths or even hints of such things. They just... looked like pliers in every physical respect; yet I found myself waiting for them to say something to me.

The root paintings are a mature fruition of this talent. They are not “people”, yet they have personhood. The best word I can come up with is “creatures”. Their dream-like suspension outside of space enhances this effect. Their lines and colors evoke emotions, but they aren’t my emotions. In fact, everything about the paintings is evocative; but the beauty is that the evocations aren’t definable or certain. On the one hand, they evoke the physical tree roots from which they are derived—but distantly, to the extent that in some cases you could look at the painting and not think “root” at all. On the other hand, they evoke thoughts, feelings, personhood—but again, distantly and indefinably, so much so that you cannot be sure these thoughts and feelings are human, much less identify them specifically.

The human brain has an entirely specialized region for processing the sight of a human face. Arrays of signals fitting the pattern are routed there for interpretation—an interpretation considerably more sophisticated and important than that devoted to most ordinary objects. Obviously there are good reasons for this, as our faces communicate so much between us, including information of which neither the sender nor receiver may be aware. I feel that somehow, Kikki’s root artwork taps into this; that she finds certain forms, patterns and colors within these dense roots and selects them out, amplifying them onto the canvas or paper. Yet she does not anthropomorphize them, so that although they attract the attention of the complex social parts of our minds, they cannot be puzzled out and solved into being one thing or another, one concrete message communicated and received. By the same token, they cannot be kicked back to some “object-interpreting” part of the brain, to be sorted out as shape and pattern, beautiful perhaps but not capable of personal interaction. Instead they bring about a dream-like sense of encountering something (or someone) strange, of beings neither human nor animal nor plant, but somehow all of these; as if one had caught a glimpse of some root forms of being.